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How Hugging Mom Teaches Me The Meaning of Love and Perhaps Beyond

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How Hugging Mom Teaches Me The Meaning of Love and Perhaps Beyond

Cover Page Footnote

Cảm ơn Mẹ. Mom, Thank You. Câu chuyện 30 năm của Mẹ, con đã kể lại dưới ánh sáng của Phật Pháp. Cảm ơn Mẹ đã dũng cảm sống vì tụi con. You have been waiting for 30 years for your stories to be told in public with "the Enlightenment". Thank you for being brave and continuing your life for us. Cảm ơn Cha và Mèo. Dad and Meo, Thank you! Thank you beautiful human beings: Jyoti Kaneria, Luis Javier Pentón Herrera, Nikkia Nelson, Gordon Clark, Zuri Espinosa, Laura Sossamon, Ann Marie Leshkovich for your initial critical feedback and continued support. Without your insights, I would not have written this piece. Thank you so much, friends! Thank you, Dr. Tinker Sachs, for a meaningful conversation. You taught me a great lesson about valuing my own country. Finally, thank you, Dr. Sue Kasun, my advisor, for giving us a critical project in class. Without your brilliant ideas in the first assignment, I would not have thought about coming back to my identities to write this piece. I am not alone in this journey. Thank you!

I reflect on the teachings of Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh, I am walking steadily, slowly, breathing in and out. I feel that I am returning to the present moment, to my true home and that there is no need to struggle as I arrive at this point in time and space. I do not need to try to arrive elsewhere. According to Nhat Hanh and DeAntonis (2015),

One of the most profound teachings is also the shortest: “I have arrived.” ... We know our final destination is the cemetery. Why are we in a hurry to get there? Why not step in the direction of life, which is the present moment? (p. 12)

I am walking with a focus on the sole of my foot, fully paying attention to the present moment. I am taking a deep breath, inhaling the cold fresh air on an early morning in the final week of December. I am taking a firm stance to receive the warmth of each ray of sunshine that is falling on my face. I am walking slowly to connect to Mother Earth because I feel her presence, because I know she is walking with me, because we are sharing a story—the story that I am confused and scared to tell. I am, therefore, inviting you to walk with me toward the end of this trail. I ask for your patience, understanding, and compassion during this walk. I hope that once we both “have arrived” at our own destinations in this meditation walk together, you can see more than one connection and meaning of a normal act: hugging.

Hugging, the act of holding someone tightly and affectionately in one’s arms, occurs multiple times in our lives. We give hugs to our close friends, colleagues, or those who we have not met for a long time; the hugger and the hugged both receive an affectionate message, depending on the closeness of their relationship to each other. As a Vietnamese who was born and raised in Vietnam, I often gave hugs to my friends for social purposes, but seldom did I give a hug to my mom. Hugging Mom is unconventional in a traditional Vietnamese family, or at least that was true in our family when we were in Vietnam before we moved to the United States.

In addition, hugging Mom by an adult son is considered weak and feminine in Vietnamese society, wherein he is not allowed to express that emotion and intimacy publicly.

I focus attentively on one particular person in this essay: my mother. I ask you to take a walk of meditation with me so that I am able to tell you a story of how hugging my mom teaches me the meaning of motherhood, of endurance, of resistance, and perhaps of beyond. I write this reflective essay because I want to add my Vietnamese mom's voice to my teaching, scholarship, academia, literature, and more importantly, to my short life. I want my mom to be forever a part of this life cycle, whether or not reincarnation will occur after we both die. In this essay I do not aim to theorize; rather, I focus on the act of being present, in the here and the now.

Breathe in. Lift one of your feet, move it forward and place it on the ground, and then shift the weight of your body into the heel. Breathe out. We have arrived at the first step.

Hugging is Sensation(al)



Ơ ầu ơ, Ồ, ví dầu cầu ván đóng đinh,
chứ cầu tre lắt lẻo,
ơ ầu ơ, ơ, cầu tre lắt lẻo,
gập ghềnh khó đi.
ơ ầu ơ ơ, khó đi mẹ dắt con đi,
chứ con thi trường học,
ơ ầu ơ ơ, con thi trường học, mẹ thi trường
đời.



O au o, the wooden bridge is bound with nails
The bamboo bridge,
O au o o, o, the bamboo bridge is rough,
difficult to cross.
O au o o, if difficult, mom will take you,
You will go to school,
O au o o, [while] you go to school, mom will
learn lessons in life.

I have been listening to this lullaby for my entire life, maybe even when I was in my mom's womb. This song is a type of folk music sung by Vietnamese mothers to their infants (sometimes by sisters to their young siblings) in the South of Vietnam, especially in the countryside (Pham, 2014). Its melodic tones and slow, free rhythms not only help lull infants and toddlers fall into sleep, but these also send a message to listeners about the barriers a wife faces when a husband is away, provide self-encouragement to a lonely mother when her husband is away for a call of duty, or sometimes reflect homesickness when a daughter has to live far away from her parents. The words “ô, ầu, ô” at the beginning of a sentence make the rhythms sound so *da diết* and emotional that one can feel the pains, loneliness, and sufferings of the Vietnamese woman.

This song brings me to a cemetery that was close to our cottage in a small town in Mekong Delta, Vietnam, three years after economic reform, the Doi Moi, was implemented in 1986 to facilitate the country's transition from a centralized economy to a socialist market. My mom used to go there every late afternoon to take a walk. In 1989, she was sitting in front of the cemetery, rubbing her belly that held her second child who would soon be born. Yes, it was I who she was bearing at that time. Due to a lack of food and money during the Doi Moi, my mom lost her first child during pregnancy. She was sitting there in front of the graves of the unknown dead, singing the lullaby when the sun was setting behind the graves. She was comforting me, telling me we did not have to worry about food and clothes. I could feel my mom's hands caressing me, hugging me through her belly, giving me great comfort that I needed, telling me that everything would be fine, and promising me that my father would come home safely.

My father was in Cambodia at that time. The economic situation in Vietnam had forced him to leave his homeland to look for money in a country where he could not speak the

language. In Cambodia, he worked as a gold digger in a risky tunnel, where he could die at any time from its walls collapsing while he was working or from diarrhea as a result of his poor diet. My mom's hugging on me while in her womb – an unborn creature – was an embrace of them both. While she hoped that she might see my father/her husband again, she did not know when or how. My mother has told me that I was the only hope at that time. As I grew inside her, my life gave her the strength to continue hers despite her many struggles. This hug at the cemetery was not just a body-sense experience; rather, it symbolized hopefulness, *nỗi nhớ* (missing a spouse), and the bravery and strength to overcome starvation, loneliness, and poverty in order to live. She lived a life for the three of us – me, my father, and her.

Daylight quickly faded; darkness brought a cold wind to the ground. My mom was sitting still, trying to catch the final rays of daylight while she was never giving up on her husband, holding on to her second baby in her belly and hoping that the next day would be brighter. She gradually and heavily stood up, still rubbing her belly and singing the lullaby, and she began the walk back to her cottage. At the cemetery in which the dead were buried, a living creature was about to be born and a light of hope was sparked. The lullaby was still being sung. ♪ ♪ ♪ *ơ ầu ơ ơ, khó đi mẹ dắt con đi, chứ con thi trường học, ơ ầu ơ ơ, con thi trường học, mẹ thi trường đời.*

Breathe in. Lift the other foot, move it forward and place it on the ground, and then shift the weight of your body into the heel. Breathe out. We have arrived at the second step.

Hugging is an Endurance

“Con à, Mẹ không biết khi nào, mà cũng không biết làm sao hai mẹ con mình mới thoát khỏi cái cảnh này” (“I don’t know when, I don’t know how we can escape from this situation.”)

My mom held me in her arms, crying out loud after having been brutally beaten by my father

when she found out he was having an affair with another woman. She had called the other woman a whore in front of him at their dating place. While she was pouring her heart out working all day to put food on the table, delivering heavy baskets of ice on an old, creaky bicycle to nearby factories in our hometown in Vietnam, the scene of a couple who were arm in arm pushed her to the limit of anger. My memory is filled with a woman with a face swollen, hair torn out. I hear a voice begging my dad to stop the violence. I was seven— confused, scared, and crying. I felt useless. I did not know what to do to protect my mom from being beaten by my father. I had so many questions in my mind: “Why didn’t she just leave him?” “Why did she decide to stay and suffer from this circumstance? Why did Papa have the right to torture my mom, his wife? Why and why?” I did not feel the warmth from her hug at all. In stark contrast, it brought me pain and tears. I hated this hug. This hug was a sign of weakness, of a surrender to life. We were passive; we were not taking a stance to fight back; we had no one to stand with us. I shared the pain that my mom was suffering during the beating and perhaps the pains that she had been suffering from the beginning of this marriage in Vietnamese society.

I wondered, “Was her *nỗi nhớ* (missing a spouse) during her waiting at the cemetery worth this cruelty?”; “Was he going to hit me, too?” I was scared. My mom hugged me tighter, using her back as a shield to protect me from the brutal beating. I wondered if my father’s beating of my mother was the result of his loss of *ĩ diện* (pride). I also wondered if he beat my mom because she had discovered his affair or because she had called his lover a whore. Perhaps, the beating was based on male privilege found within patriarchal or communist societies, like Vietnam, where a man could get away with husband-on-wife violence. Maybe, my father just wanted to hit my mom to show his male dominance and power. To be clear, this was not the first time my dad had brutally beaten my mom. It did not happen just once. It happened a countless

number of times— so often that I cannot remember how many times I cried out loudly, even more loudly than my mom. I cried so that I could overcome the fear of family violence. The memory of these beatings has remained with me ever since I was a child, but so does the memory of my mom’s hug. After *Doi Moi*, both of my parents belonged to the working class in Vietnamese society. My mom did not complete elementary school in Vietnam, whereas my dad was able to finish middle school. My mother, the seventh child out of twelve children, dropped out of the fourth grade to join the labor market to help her family overcome the financial crisis, whereas my father was a son of a *Vietnam Cong Hoa* (the Republic of Vietnam) Chief Commander. Even though my mom experienced interrupted formal education, society was where she learned the moral lessons of a girl, a daughter, and a woman in a patriarchal Confucian society. The lessons she learned were that a woman has to follow paternal authority; a wife has to follow her husband; and a widow has to follow her eldest son – no matter what.

As a result of the lessons she learned from the social norms my mom did not fight back despite being brutally beaten. She felt *bất lực*, powerless and passive, to the social and cultural frames that were placed on her. She always told me, “*Nếu không phải vì con, chắc Mẹ đã tự tử từ lâu để thoát khỏi cái địa ngục trần gian này!*” (“If it were not because of you, I would commit suicide to escape from this living hell.”) Thank you, Mom. I am honored that you found strength in me to hold on and continue this life. Other times, my mom comforted both herself and me, saying that she must have done something terribly wrong to my father in her previous life and that was the reason why she had to suffer in this life cycle. That is the twisted interpretation of karma and reincarnation that is part of the Buddhist philosophy, an interpretation that I repeatedly heard while growing up. According to this philosophy, if you mistreated a person either in this life or in a previous one, you would be mistreated in the next life in the same way

you mistreated that person in the past life. My mom has held on to her faith to relieve her pain and overcome mental struggles. The struggles were held inside, kept secretly in different layers of emotions related to nightly hugs and stories of morality and faith that I was too young to recognize, to name, or to share with her. There were some nights that my mom held me in her arms, crying, but I did not know why. There were other nights that she told me that I needed to grow up as a strong man to protect her, or at least to understand her stories. There were other nights that I was so thrilled because my mom was telling me interesting stories of reincarnation that I found intriguing. After those moments, I felt that all I could do was to hug her back when we were lying down in a *mùng* (a Vietnamese tent made of silk) and wished that I could grow up quickly to give her a support that she needed.

While writing these lines, the feeling of those hugs in the tent surrounds me as if it is in this present moment. The memory of those hugs draws out an image of a woman who sat alone in a dark room, suffering, scared to death, and enduring her profound pain in silence, a pain which was unspeakable and unprotectable. The hugs traveled through time, through space, and ultimately went beyond words ultimately, as I grew older, pushing me to speak up for my mom. I am now no longer a useless seven-year-old boy. I have become a son who can give back a hug to my mom to protect her. The position of huggers has changed, and so has the meaning.

Hugging is a Resistance

“Mày tránh ra, không thôi tao ném cái ly này vô đầu mày bây giờ!” --(“Get out of my sight or I will throw this glass at your head!” As those words hung in the air, a glass of wine was immediately thrown at me, whizzing by my hair, and shattering to bits on the floor. Never did I forget the moment when I finally stood up to my father, to his violent abuse of my mother. I yelled, *“Cha tránh ra! Cha là đàn ông trong gia đình này. Cha không có quyền làm vậy với*

Mẹ!” (“Dad, stay away from my mom! You are a man in this family. You don’t have the rights to do this to my mom!”). I angrily and fearlessly spoke directly to my dad. *“Đừng có hù Mẹ. Cha đừng có hù Mẹ là Cha tự tử. Con không có tin đâu. Cha dọa được Mẹ, chứ không dọa được con đâu. Cha có ngon thì dứt tay vô ổ điện đi, nếu Cha muốn chết!”* (“Stop scaring my mom. You cannot threaten my mom by telling her that you are going to commit suicide. I do not believe you. You might scare her, but you do not scare me! Go ahead and put your finger into the high-power outlet if you want to die!”) I was 17, ready to go to college. I was no longer afraid of being silent and did not want to comply with the social rules of Vietnamese society that allow a man to make decisions for all and that allow him to hold the utmost power. I refused to do so. I resisted the culture that tells me not to express emotions and feelings in front of the public by hugging mom. This time, I wanted to be her shield of protection against any beating or violence.

My body instinctively reacted to lean toward my mom to shield her unconditionally without any seconds of thoughts of hesitation from my father’s violent blows. I was standing there, in the middle of a party that had once been full of laughter, but which immediately turned into silence. Standing there, I not only faced the power of my dad but also fought against our society’s moral value that claims a son cannot speak up to his dad. And by hugging my mom in the middle of the party, I was also conquering the stereotypes that a man could not show emotions publicly. Hugging my mom was an act of resistance against gender bias, against devaluing the role of women in society, and against dehumanization. This resistance was the fruit of countless attempts to break the wall of gender inequality, violent abuse, *sĩ diện*, and male privilege in Vietnamese society. The hegemonic masculinity had transformed my father into someone who devalued a person who shared the bed with him every night, cooked him a good meal every day, and accompanied him through life’s challenges. He might have forgotten these

things, but I do not. Specifically, I do not forget the scene of a woman with a face swollen, hair torn out, and a voice begging her husband to stop the brutal beating. Neither do I forget his actions, nor do I forgive him.

Somewhere in this recollection of painful memories, I forgot to breathe. I stopped counting steps. I did not really meditate in the way I wished to accomplish at the beginning of this walk. The memories were too powerful, too intense for me to breathe; instead, I held my breath. I let my thoughts keep running uncontrollably. I did not walk mindfully. I got lost in the midst of a path of thinking. I never thought these images would be so vivid, so alive, and so painful this way. I forgot the being, the presence. I let the hatred lead the way. I needed to soften my shoulders, let go of my neck, release the tension in my body, and try to re-focus in this walk: I needed to just be present.

Let me come back to walking meditation. Let's breathe in. Lift the other foot, move it forward and place it on the ground, and then shift the weight of your body into the heel. Breathe out. We have arrived at the third step.

Hugging is a Forgiveness?

My mom, dad, and I arrived in the United States in the final week of December, 2014. We are now green card holders. We hope to pass the naturalization test after five years of residing here so that we can become citizens and officially hold U.S. passports. But what good is this citizenship recognition if my dad has not changed his way of treating my mom? Will the naturalization test help denaturalize his hegemonic roles and ways of thinking that he brought from Vietnam to this country? I have been observing my father and mom since we settled down here in Georgia. We wanted to build a new life here, to stay away from the pain that we had; the pains that are still aching among us whenever we tell mundane stories about Vietnam.

All of a sudden, I recognized that I have continuously given hugs to my mom, with a hope of healing her pain, but I forgot to give any to my dad. I completely forgot his existence in my life. I was blinded because of the hatred with which I had grown up. In a diary entry, I wrote:

My mom's soul is healing, but I do not know when she is completely healed. What I can do is to continue the act of hugging when she comes back from work, when she is cooking a meal, or when she is ready for bed. To her, that hug can be a warm, supporting and uplifting act at the end of a hard-working day. To me, hugging is an act of love, of resistance, of piecing back together broken pieces of wine glasses thrown at a party that night, of healing scars, and of being. Through hugging, not only am I trying to support my mother in healing her physical and emotional scars, but I also am trying to learn how to heal my scars. I am working toward healing the scars I have from growing up witnessing the violence and abuse from my father that left the scars on my mom. And some day in the future, I do not know when, I will give my dad a hug as a sign of forgiveness for what he has done to us. But, there is a long healing journey that awaits me before I can reach that stage of forgiving him.

Through those lines, I did not give my dad a chance to correct his wrong. I asked for healing, but I did not allow myself to be healed. I did not allow my dad to step in this ritualistic healing process because I neglected him as a person, as a human being, and most importantly, as my father.

Breathe in...Hold the breath in the chest...Breathe out...

Breathe in...Hold the breath in the chest...Breathe out...

Breathe in...Hold the breath in the chest...Breathe out...

I still find it hard to hold my breath. I am confused. I am exhausted.

Awakening?

I am walking in a misty forest. I am struggling to find a way out. I long to see the sunlight at the end of this trail. I long for mindfulness. I came here to look for a peaceful space. I came here to tell a story about hugging mom. I did not come here to look for forgiveness. “What happened?”, I wonder. But then, I continued my thought: “Who should I forgive: me or my father?”, “Should I forgive him, despite what he has done to both my mom and me?” ,” “Or, should I forgive me first because of my *bất hiếu* (not showing filial piety to my father), because of the growing hatred inside me that has caused me to almost forget the existence of my father in this life? My mind is running uncontrollably again.

Did I fail to walk mindfully?

I close my eyes.

“Con à. Ngày xưa, trước khi Đức Phật thành Phật, người là một hoàng tử của một nước. Thế rồi, khi Ngài nhận ra được những khổ ải của con người (sinh, lão, bệnh, tử), Ngài quyết định xuất gia đi tu. Ngài đã vượt qua mọi cám dỗ của những yêu tinh để có thể đắc đạo, trở thành Phật sau 49 ngày đêm tu thiền dưới cây Bồ Đề. Ngài nhận ra sự đau khổ của con người chính là sự u mê, chấp ngộ, không buông xả. Khi vượt qua được những cái đó rồi, thì con sẽ tìm được hạnh phúc.” (“Sweetheart, you know, before the Buddha became ‘the Buddha’, he was a prince of a country. Then, when he started to recognize sufferings that people had to go through (birth, aging, illness, and death), he decided to become a monk. He overcame the temptations and obstacles given by the evils so that he could be awakened after 49 days and nights of meditative concentration under the Bodhi tree. He recognized the pains and sufferings of human beings that rooted from confusion, ignorance and not-letting-go mindset. When you can overcome those things, you can find happiness.”)

“Mẹ ơi, vậy Đức Phật có giúp chúng ta thấy được ánh sáng giác ngộ đó không? Ngài có phép thần thông giúp chúng ta có tiền và đồ ăn không? Rồi, Ngài có thể nói chuyện với Cha là đấng có đánh mẹ nữa được không?” (“So, mom, will the Buddha help us see through the lights of awakening? Will he have miracle that helps us have food and money? Will he be able to talk to us, talk to dad that he will not harm you anymore?”)

“Được con, nhưng mình phải cầu nguyện con à.” (“Sure thing, but we need to pray for that, sweetheart.”) The story of faith that my mom was telling me in the *mùng* has still echoed in my mind. I open my eyes.

“Where have I gone so far with collecting these painful memories?” I was in my mother’s womb, getting the protection, love, and hope from my mom. I was growing up, witnessing the violence and abuse in my house, and wanting to protect my mom. Somewhere in this journey, I always wanted to become *the* man for her. Perhaps, I was profoundly affected by the cultural norms in Vietnam that I should be the man, the man, and the man. I let confusion, ignorance, and a not-letting-go mindset grow up inside me. Perhaps, as my father, I have focused on myself and the ego of showing masculinity, and I have given myself the right to be *over* others. This meditation walk is so powerful that it shifts my perspective toward social justice and unequal gender roles in Vietnamese society. This walk changes the way that I have looked at the meaning of hugging from loving, endurance, resistance, and protection to a supporting space for a woman who was affected by both colonialism and patriarchy.

I took my mom’s voice away. I heard her stories, but I did not really listen to her. I should have been her ally to support her independence and helped her find the courage, strength, and confidence that she used to have as she was sitting at the cemetery before I was born. I need

to give the strength back to her. I need to bridge the gap between my father and her, and perhaps the bridge the gap between my father and me, too. I am done trying to be “man enough”.

I usually write in reflections throughout courses in my current doctoral program that I have always wanted to give a “voice” to marginalized youths/students. Now, I am self-inquiring. “Do I really do that? Or, do I again use the power of patriarchal, hegemonic masculinity to silence others, violating the principles of freedom, democracy, and equity?” “What do I mean when I keep saying that I want to work toward healing others and use postcolonial feminism in theorizing the research for marginalization?” “Do I truly mean it, or am I using it to satisfy the big ego of the man in me?”.

Am I awakened?

Hugging is a Bridge

I close my eyes again, listen to birds singing, and feel their wings flapping on the sky. Then, I am gradually walking down the trail. I mind my steps again. The story between me and my mom in the *mùng* about the Buddha and his journey embraces me. All of a sudden, I am struck as I am reminded of *tĩnh tâm*, a Buddhist and meditation teaching philosophy that asks a practitioner to come back to the zero-ness to find a true self. The water under the bridge where I am standing is flowing because she is pure and contains no weights in her body, even when she hits a rock. In contrast, my mind is heavy and full of “weights” with hatred, anxiety, confusion, and *cố chấp* (not letting go). I didn’t listen to my mom and her stories about the Buddha carefully. I let the negativity lead my way. I let the weights hold the breath in my chest. I let *thù hận* (the hatred) lure me so that I did not allow myself to recognize the flesh as a part of my life. Specifically, I did not acknowledge the blood flowing in my veins as coming from of a person who partially gave birth to me: my father. I need to talk to him. I need to listen to his stories, too.

That is something I am always scared to do, but I have to do this – for the three of us. It all began from a hug; I should come back to it. This time, it will be a big hug for the three of us.

I think I have arrived at my own destination in this meditation walk. I am home.

Have you arrived?

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